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Gender and Career Progression in Theology and Religious Studies

Mathew Guest, Sonya Sharma and Robert Song



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Executive summary

- The low proportion of women within the subject areas of Theology and Religious Studies has long been observed, but has hitherto not been systematically charted within the UK context. This study seeks to measure gender imbalance among staff and students in UK TRS departments, set this issue in broader context, explore reasons why these patterns might have emerged, and make recommendations for how universities might address associated problems.
- The proportion of women among both students and staff in TRS in UK universities are treated as inter-connected issues, as they both relate to the same academic culture.
- Data was collected from the Higher Education Statistics Agency and from TRS departments directly as a means to piecing together a gender profile of staff and students across the UK. Explanations as to the emerging patterns were then explored via extended interviews with TRS academics, including females at various stages of the academic career.
- At undergraduate level in TRS, females outnumber males (60%-40%); by taught postgraduate level, the proportion of females drops to 42%, and then to 33% among postgraduate research students.
- Women make up 29% of academic staff in TRS: 37% among early career academics and lecturers, 34% among senior lecturers, and just 16% among professors.
- A comparison of TRS with a cross-section of other disciplines across the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences reveals the same trajectory of gradual female withdrawal in tandem with academic progression. However, the drop-out rate is more dramatic in TRS – especially between undergraduate and taught postgraduate levels – than in these other disciplines.
- Structural factors influencing this pattern include the tendency of some TRS departments to recruit postgraduates from international contexts in which a form of Christianity that favours the authority of men is prominent.
- Interviews with TRS academics reveal a range of further relevant factors, including entrenched connections to Christianity and Christian churches, the gendered style of academic engagement in some sub-disciplines, and the associated uphill struggle to develop the confidence to succeed within a male-dominated environment.
- Generic issues endemic to the academy also remain influential, including poor allowance for childcare and family responsibilities, and bullying.

Introduction

Achieving gender equality is a continuing concern in both society and academy. In her recently published book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, Sheryl Sandberg maintains that “women’s voices are still not heard equally” (2013, 5). She goes on to argue that women need to confront the barriers that they internalize, such as the inner voice which says it is not okay to speak up. She argues that women need to ‘lean in’. By doing this and having greater ambition, more women will be promoted to positions of leadership, which in turn will perhaps generate more gender-equitable places of employment. While Sandberg advises women to lean in, others argue that people need to lean on institutions to improve their policies on equality for working environments (Cochrane 2013). In the UK, women in higher education face this predicament. How hard do they lean in for their own academic ambitions, lean on to make institutional change, and at what cost?

In this study we are particularly interested in how this dilemma is confronted and dealt with by women who are pursuing an academic career in the disciplines of Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) in UK universities. In talking to women scholars who are at varying stages of their careers about their experiences of academia we have encountered many who speak about being in an environment where they are in the minority among men, in a culture that often affects their confidence, where they observe the difficulties of balancing the demands of academic and family life, and where they have experienced bullying and particular challenges in obtaining promotion. Their experiences demonstrate both the rewards and costs of leaning in and pursuing a career in the academy, and further demonstrate the changes that need to happen if TRS departments are to achieve gender equality. Gathered quantitative and qualitative evidence reveal an imbalance with respect to gender within TRS

departments across the UK. At the undergraduate level the number of female students is higher than male students, and for Master’s degrees it is relatively even, but at doctoral level and in academic positions, the pattern is reversed, with men often outnumbering women by a significant margin. Drawing on survey and interview data, we explore why these patterns might be in place, keeping in mind how staff and student gender profiles are separate but interrelated phenomena. Indeed, while the two are not directly related – given the regular turnover of students and much slower turnover of staff – they have a significant indirect relationship insofar as the culture of staff models gender expectations that may well influence academic aspirations among female students. As we will show, there are issues of gender particular to TRS in the UK, as well as other gender-related issues faced by women that are endemic across academia. We discuss our findings after a brief overview of literature on gender in higher education, which interweaves and corresponds with our own observations of women pursuing a career in TRS.

Issues of gender in higher education

The academy has traditionally been a male space, but since the expansion of higher education in the 1980s, women have come to outnumber men on several university courses and in some academic disciplines (Cotterill et al. 2007). Many women are attracted to a career in higher education because of its autonomy, collaboration and intellectual rewards, but universities have been slow to institutionalize gender equality. Several books have been published about women and men’s experiences as staff and students across subject areas in the university sector (Cotterill et al. 2007; Marshall 1997; Thomas 1990). Some have examined the significance of social class and race in addition to gender on

university choice in Britain (Reay et al. 2005), while others have looked specifically at the impact of gender on students undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Amongst the central findings of these studies are that gender is an essential category of analysis, it intersects with other categories of difference, it affects the lived experience of women (and men) in universities, and that issues of gender have transformed institutional policies and environments.

With regard to our study, some of the themes that emerged which coincide with literature published on gender in higher education are the experiences of female doctoral students, levels of self-confidence, juggling academic and family life, career progression and feminism. For many women, the process of doing an MA or PhD will often determine whether they pursue a career in academia or not. It is on the basis of this experience that they begin to see the rewards and costs of being an academic. In research conducted in New Zealand by Carter et al. (2013, 339), it was found that women doctoral students experienced gendered tensions between cultural expectations that emphasize passivity, submission and family nurture, on the one hand, and the qualities that are highly regarded in academia such as assertiveness, confidence and clear communication, on the other. Such tensions can present women with new opportunities and challenges in reconciling the various aspects of their identities. For many women doctoral students their supervisory relationship can have a profound effect. In a survey of faculty members at Norwegian universities Smeby (2000) found that there was a tendency for postgraduate students to choose supervisors of their own gender, a tendency that was stronger among female students than male students. Similarly, Schroeder and Mynatt (1993) were interested in knowing whether women's interactions with faculty of both genders would affect their pursuit of graduate study. They

observed that female students supervised by women, as opposed to men, considered that the "quality interactions" (569) they had with them could positively affect their experience of graduate school. However, positive faculty relations are not the case for all women students or staff. Bagliole (1993) found that women staff members could experience discrimination, isolation and exclusion from their male colleagues if they were in the minority, thus finding less support (431). In her interviews with 43 women at a British university, she discovered that this would cause them to "put pressure on themselves to perform better than male colleagues, and to avoid being identified with other women" (431). Bagliole contends that "they become 'honorary men' and as such are in no position to support other women" (431). Bagliole's findings are not the experience of all women in academia. Nonetheless, although many universities have attempted to advance gender equality, there are a series of personal and professional negotiations, which women academics are forced to make (Cotterill et al. 2007).

Certainly, maternity and parenting responsibilities are factors that impact women's decisions to pursue a career in higher education. It was not until more women entered into the academy that parental accommodations began to be considered. Many universities now offer flexible working hours and childcare facilities on campus, but the conflicting demands of academic and family responsibilities challenge a work-life balance, which is still oriented to long hours that suit an individual who has a partner at home. Our research included women who described the challenges of balancing a family and an academic career. Others who were not parents wondered if this was possible, while some had decided not to have children. The ways in which universities accommodate parents are likely to affect women's choice of a career in academia and their subsequent productivity and

work satisfaction (Wolf-Wendel and Ward 2006). Women may wait until their children are grown before even pursuing a doctoral degree, or they may study or work part-time in order to manage parenting and partnership.

More so, and now more than ever, obtaining a job and career progression within academia in the UK is highly competitive and pressurized due to recent measures of evaluation related to the Research Excellence Framework (REF). In talking to women about achieving academic goals such as publications, funding for research and positive teaching evaluations, a theme that emerged was women's levels of self-confidence (Caplan 1995). This runs through literature on gender and higher education. Canadian researchers have found that women can often "do good but feel bad" (Acker and Feuerverger 1996). Acker and Feuerverger (1996) observed that "feeling bad" is related to the reward system in academia: women support students and staff in a number of ways but are disappointed with the results. They contend that while qualities of caring and connection that many women possess are to be praised, these can frequently leave women in academic life feeling exploited or restricted by gendered pastoral responsibilities. This can affect levels of confidence and career mobility, especially if such responsibilities impact on research outputs, which are tied to esteem and promotion. An example of how such gendered norms can influence women's career progression is found in a US based study carried out by Madera et al. (2009) on letters of recommendation written for academic positions. Through two studies they "investigated differences in agentic and communal characteristics in letters of recommendation for men and women for academic positions and whether such differences influenced selection decisions in academia" (1591). They discovered that "women were described as more communal and less agentic than men and that communal characteristics have a negative relationship with

hiring decisions in academia that are based on letters of recommendation" (1591). These results are particularly important given that academic institutions require such references for their recruitment processes, but also because they reveal how gender stereotypes can work against "women's entrance and mobility" in academic jobs, especially those related to leadership and more senior positions (1592).

In her writing about women's experiences in TRS, Malone (1999) points to the significance of the prevailing academic culture, which depending on institution and department can be predominantly male and emphasize forms of collegiality that are really about "male sociability" (224). In our interviews women discussed the preponderance of men in departmental meetings and the experience of walking into staff social settings where they were ignored. Although numerous women have felt empowered by feminism, many can exercise caution both on their courses and as members of staff by editing or suppressing questions and opinions. As a result, some women find themselves on the margins, a place which can provide a community of like-minded people where dynamics of power and privilege are discussed, but which can also prevent one from becoming a full member of the academic community (Malone 1999). Feminists have encouraged women to claim the centre (e.g hooks 1984; Malone 1999), but this is a complex challenge and not all women are or identify as feminist. Advocating or mentoring women can be by choice or a role thrust upon women faculty, roles that can give them a great deal of informal power in the institution, hearing stories, becoming confidants. Likewise, they may end up speaking for the student rather than the institution, risking becoming a lone voice or scapegoat for "women's issues" (Malone 1999, 224). There are also the strategies that many women employ in order to be heard without being put into the category of "victim" or "difficult" or what Ahmed (2010) terms the

“feminist killjoy.” As she states, “to be recognized as a feminist is to be assigned to a difficult category and a category of difficulty. You are ‘already read’ as ‘not easy to get along with’ when you name yourself as feminist. You have to show you are not difficult through displaying signs of good will and happiness” (Ahmed 2010, 66). Undoubtedly, feminism has helped immensely to transform the university landscape, but whether or not women identify as feminist, the ways in which they present their voice has affected and continues to affect the formation of their academic identities, their ease of integration into the research community, and their academic career aspirations.

In the following sections, after an explanation of how we conducted our project, we first use quantitative data to investigate the nature of the gender balance across TRS departments, and then interview data to explore women’s experiences of career progression in these disciplines.

This study

This project had two key aims: a) to measure the imbalance of gender with respect to staff and students within Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) departments in UK universities, and b) to explore why these patterns appear as they do. Within the context of this report, our quantitative forms of data illuminate our first key aim, while our qualitative interviews shed light on our second. The data analysed here has been drawn from three sources. First, we gathered data on the numbers of male and female academic staff within TRS departments across UK universities. This information was gathered from heads of TRS departments and their websites, allowing us to break numbers down into categories of academic seniority (professor, senior lecturer, etc). Of 58 TRS units listed in official records, we were able to gather detailed

staff data on 41 of them (i.e. 71% coverage). These figures pertain to the 2010-11 academic year. Second, we collected data on the gender breakdown within the student population, making use of official national statistics available via the online Higher Education Information Database for Institutions (HEIDI), run by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). The mass of data stored on the HEIDI system allowed us to compare TRS with a range of other disciplines, and to make comparisons over time.

Third, we conducted thirteen extended interviews with academics from a range of UK universities as a means of exploring how issues of gender are experienced and handled within TRS in its different institutional contexts. Interviewees included senior academics who had occupied significant ‘gatekeeper’ roles such as head of a department, faculty or research group, in order to achieve a broad-based understanding of how processes of recruitment take place and how these might contribute to gender imbalance, particularly at the academic staff level. The remainder of the interviewees – the majority – were female academics working in TRS who occupy a range of points on the career spectrum, from postdoctoral researchers through to newly appointed lecturers, senior lecturers and professors. In speaking to such a diverse range of individuals, we hoped to gain some insights into how differences in age, personal circumstances and institutional context shape experiences of career progression among female academics within this subject area.

TRS: the overall profile

Table 1 provides an overall demographic gender profile of Theology and Religious Studies within UK universities. The figures for students reveal much more when they are disaggregated by level of study, and this is especially relevant for our purposes, as patterns in the progression from

undergraduate to taught postgraduate, and then to research postgraduate study, can be expected to say something about how successful different subject areas are at retaining strong female students.

	% Female	% Male
Undergraduate (first degree)	60.1	39.9
Other undergraduate	62	38
Taught postgraduate	41.7	58.3
Research postgraduate	33.2	66.8
Academic staff	29.4	70.6

Table 1: Gender distribution among TRS students and staff across the UK (2010-11).

This project was initially informed by a sense of the demographic profile of Theology and Religious Studies, one based on the professional experiences of the three authors. That sense could be summarised as: while women outnumber men at undergraduate level, the gender ratio becomes more and more male-heavy at more senior levels of the academic world, up to a point where the staff profile is distinguished by a significant male majority. As can be plainly seen from the above figures in table 1, this impression is entirely – perhaps alarmingly – accurate. Across all UK university departments of Theology and Religious Studies in 2010-11, the undergraduate population was 60.1% female, 39.9% male. These are the figures for those studying for their first degree. The ‘other undergraduates’ measure – which includes a significant number for TRS, presumably on account of the number of mature students

studying theology in connection with church ministry training – is remarkably similar, although we suspect the pattern here to be influenced by a slightly different, if overlapping, set of factors. In order to ensure straightforward comparison with other subject areas (which typically have only a handful of students falling within this latter category), and as these figures are so similar, we will henceforth deal with the undergraduate level with sole reference to the ‘first degree’ figure.

As the gender ratio becomes more skewed in favour of male students over the course of the student experience, it is interesting to ask at which point most women drop out. Between undergraduate and MA level, there is a drop in the proportion of women that amounts to 18.4 percentage points; the drop between MA and PhD level is 8.5 percentage points. The most dramatic opt-out occurs after undergraduate study, beyond which the student population has a clear, and increasing, male majority. By the time we get to the profile of academic staff, the female majority evident at undergraduate level has halved, and a 70%/30% split favours men by a significant margin.

Drawing from our own survey of the 41 TRS departments or units across universities in the UK¹, we are able to identify the gender distribution of staff at different levels of seniority, from early career academics (including, for example, postdoctoral researchers) to professors. The results are provided in table 2 below. At each of the three more junior staff levels, women reflect a proportion that is not significantly dissimilar from the overall figure, all around 35%. The most striking difference is at professorial level, where well over 80% of staff are male, a finding that takes the incremental

¹ These figures are valid for the 2010-11 academic year. Given on-going structural changes in numerous

universities since then, the figure of 41 units is likely to decrease gradually over coming years.

gender imbalance charted above even further along the same trajectory.

	% Female	% Male
Early career academics	37%	63%
Lecturers	37%	63%
Senior Lecturers	34%	66%
Professors	16%	84%
Overall academic staff	29%	71%

Table 2: Gender distribution among TRS staff across the UK, at different levels of seniority (2010-11).

To put this in context, TRS staff overall are disproportionately represented at the senior end of the academic scale, with 60.1% promoted to senior lecturer or professor. In fact over 50% of female TRS academics have this senior status. However what is more telling is that for male academics, the figure is almost 65%. Men are disproportionately represented at the higher – and especially the professorial – levels of academic staff. The results are even more striking once we disaggregate the figure into constituent universities; for example, fewer than 10% of TRS departments have a proportion of female staff of 51% or above; around 9 out of 10 are majority male departments. For 39% of departments, female academics make up only a quarter (or less) of their staff.

To sum up, the student population entering TRS at undergraduate level is majority female, but a smaller proportion of females occupy more advanced levels of study, so that the postgraduate student community is majority male. This pattern of a gradually diminishing female proportion is extended into academic staff; although at junior levels the pattern is not as marked as it is for students, at professorial

level the proportion of females is strikingly low, at well under 20%. The trend in the overall student population can to some degree explain the male-dominated profile of academic staff, although, as we shall explore later on, there are other factors that also demand consideration.

Comparisons across subject areas

Patterns in the gender breakdown within TRS have little meaning outside of a broader comparison with other disciplines; if a serious imbalance exists, then this measure takes on meaning only in relation to its degree and broader profile when compared with what is going on in other university subject areas. In this section we compare the gender distribution among students within TRS, Philosophy, English, Anthropology, Chemistry and Mathematics, the aim being to achieve a cross section of subjects representative of the breadth typically evident within UK universities. Philosophy is included as the closest subject to TRS in terms of general subject matter and approach; it is also a subject whose gender imbalance has been the focus of scrutiny in recent years, and so comparisons afford a useful engagement with parallel debates among Philosophers. English appears as another arts and humanities subject with which to compare TRS and Philosophy, just in case these are atypical. The remaining three are comparator subjects from the social and natural sciences: Mathematics as a more theoretical subject, Chemistry as more applied and lab-based, and with more obvious connections with industry that has a reputation for having a male-dominated personnel (Sapleton and Takruri-Rizk, 2008). Anthropology is included to represent the social sciences, as it has a clear and coherent identity across the UK. (Selecting these particular disciplines also has practical advantages as they exist as singular categories within the HEIDI database – unlike, say,

Engineering or Computer Science, which are disaggregated into sub-categories - and so can be compared in a reasonably straightforward way).

Tables 3, 4 and 5 (below) provide a breakdown of the proportion of males and females among students at undergraduate (first degree), taught postgraduate and research postgraduate levels within each of our six subject areas. In order to present more clearly how these subject-specific gender profiles compare to one another, we have also presented the data in bar chart form (chart 1), showing levels of female participation at progressive levels of study within each subject.

	% Female	% Male
Theology & Religious Studies	60.1	39.9
Philosophy	44.8	55.2
English	72.8	27.2
Mathematics	39.5	60.5
Chemistry	42.7	57.3
Anthropology	72.6	27.4

Table 3: First degree undergraduate students across subject areas in the UK (2010-11) by gender.

	% Female	% Male
Theology & Religious Studies	41.7	58.3
Philosophy	38.7	61.3
English	70.5	29.5
Mathematics	35.8	64.2
Chemistry	41	59
Anthropology	73.5	26.5

Table 4: Taught postgraduate students across subject areas in the UK (2010-11) by gender.

	% Female	% Male
Theology & Religious Studies	33.2	66.8
Philosophy	33.7	66.3
English	61.7	38.3
Mathematics	27.2	72.8
Chemistry	39.7	60.3
Anthropology	62	38

Table 5: Postgraduate research students across subject areas in the UK (2010-11) by gender.

As is clear from table 3, while TRS has a female majority among undergraduates, that majority is not as large as that found within Anthropology and English. For both of these subjects, almost three quarters of their undergraduate population are female. On the other hand, Philosophy, Chemistry and Mathematics have a clear male majority at undergraduate level, most marked in Mathematics, whose undergraduates are 60.5% male.

The most revealing findings, however, are found when comparing the figures across the 3 tables, summarised in chart 1. As can be seen, the incremental decline in the proportion of female students between undergraduate, taught postgraduate and research postgraduate levels appears characteristic of all of these subject areas. The key difference is in the point from which they drop (English and Anthropology start off with a far higher proportion of females at undergraduate level), and the gradient of the decline (steeper in TRS than all of the others, especially between undergraduate and taught postgraduate level). This is perhaps more strikingly apparent in chart 2, which highlights how these trajectories of change compare within different subject areas. Looking at the bare figures, there is a decline in TRS between the proportion of females at undergraduate level and

at postgraduate research level that amounts to 26.9 percentage points. The figure for Philosophy is 11.1; for English it is 11.1; for Maths it is 12.3; for Chemistry it is 3.0; for Anthropology it is 10.6. The drop off rate for female TRS students is more than twice that of any of these other subjects.

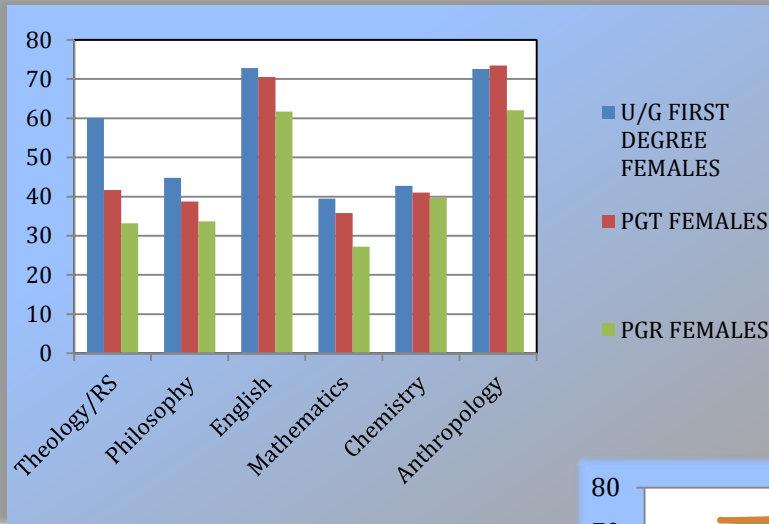


Chart 1: Percentage of female students at progressive levels of study across subject areas (2010-11).

This seems to suggest TRS reflects a problem endemic across the sector, but in a more exaggerated form, indicating factors specific to TRS are driving a more dramatic gender bias as students progress through the academic career. It is especially noteworthy that while Chemistry has a lower proportion of female undergraduates than TRS – perhaps reflecting the male-oriented reputation of many of the ‘hard sciences’ – its gender distribution is more balanced across levels of study than all of the other subjects. This reflects a female dropout rate far less dramatic than the other disciplines, suggesting Chemistry is much more effective at retaining female students into postgraduate levels of study.

In summary, a general pattern of proportional decline in female students as we move from undergraduate through postgraduate levels

characterises subject areas across the university curriculum. This is not the same as saying women are uniformly under-represented – women still make up the majority of postgraduates in English and Anthropology – but it does indicate a widespread pattern of withdrawal that reflects decreasing female

participation in tandem with academic progression. This pattern is most dramatic – the changes steepest – within Theology and Religious Studies, whose student gender profile at undergraduate level is almost an inverse image of what it is at postgraduate level. Therefore, we can expect to find factors distinctive to TRS that can explain this heightened expression of the general picture.

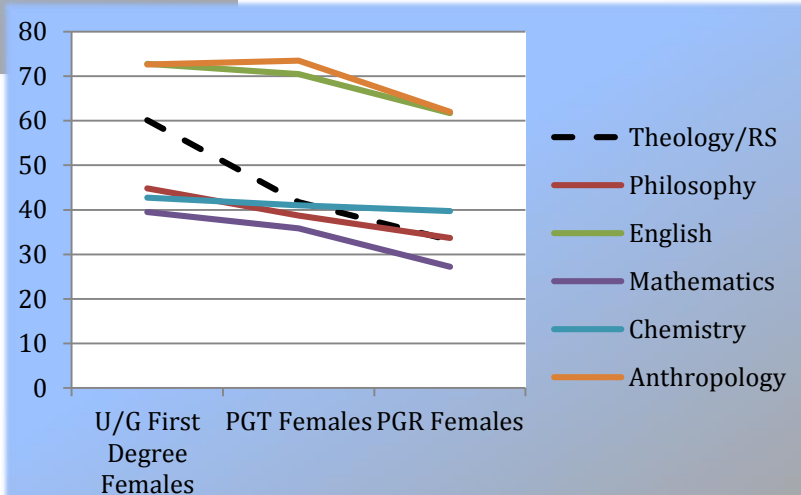


Chart 2: Percentage of female students at progressive levels of study across subject areas (2010-11), comparing trajectories of change over time.

Postgraduate recruitment: the geographical selectivity factor

The high proportion of males among postgraduate students in TRS may be attributable to a variety of factors, such as the nature of the disciplines within TRS, the connection of theology departments to clergy training, and so

on. However, one possible explanation stands out as worthy of special consideration. Some TRS departments – including some of the largest in terms of staff and student numbers – have a great deal of success recruiting postgraduate students from countries where Christianity is strong and where churches often support and fund their members to do postgraduate theological study. The most obvious examples here are the USA and South Korea, where evangelical churches are populous and well resourced, and often able and willing to meet the full costs of a PhD in the UK when that PhD equips a valued church member with learning and credentials in Biblical studies or dogmatic theology. Universities like St Andrews and Durham have been particularly successful at attracting students from these kinds of backgrounds in recent years. With the special value attached to high international course fees by universities struggling in a global recession, it is understandable that institutions will seek to nurture this enthusiastic market. One possible by-product of this pattern, though, is a heightened imbalance in favour of male students, for the very churches willing to fund PhD study are, for the most part, those churches that privilege the authority and status of men. In other words, if a TRS department has as a major source of postgraduate recruitment US and South Korean evangelicals supported by their churches, we would expect this to skew the postgraduate population in favour of male students.

This is important not just as a possible explanation, helping us account for the trends we have uncovered. It is also helpful as a means of attributing priority among a number of causal factors. For if the relative gender imbalance in TRS can be attributed to these patterns in recruitment, then the factors perpetuating the problem may have less to do with institutional or discipline-specific cultures within UK universities, and more to do with a market-

driven impetus to maximise engagement from specific international communities.

The low number of TRS departments in the UK means that it is not possible to test this explanation against other potential explanations by the use of statistical methods. However, it is possible to fashion a proxy indicator, by selecting some departments which, on the basis of anecdotal evidence, might be influenced by this trend, and comparing the numbers of UK/EU postgraduates with overseas students (i.e. those from outside the EU, many of whom are likely to be North American or South Korean in origin). On this basis we selected four universities (Aberdeen, Durham, Nottingham, St Andrews), and examined the gender distribution of their TRS postgraduate population, working with 2012-13 figures provided by administrators at those universities.

The overall proportion of females among postgraduates studying in the UK's TRS departments is 39.1%. This is working with the latest (2011-12) figures, making them as directly comparable as possible with the figures provided to us by specific institutions. When broken down by category of nationality, the proportion of females among UK/EU students is 42.8%, among overseas students, 28.9%. When we compare these figures to those provided by the universities of Aberdeen, Durham, Nottingham and St Andrew's, we find a marked divergence. Their aggregate proportion of female TRS postgraduates is 29.6%, significantly lower than the national TRS figure. When broken down by nationality category, the difference is even more revealing: Home/EU students include 38.7% females (not dramatically lower than the national figure), but Overseas students include only 19.6% females (*less than half* of the national proportion). In other words, these universities *do* have a disproportionately low number of female postgraduates when compared to national patterns for the subject area, and this difference

could be attributed to the demographic profile of their overseas postgraduate populations. It may also be germane that three of these four departments have a staff gender profile that is significantly more male dominated than the mean average for the discipline.² Whether this indicates a shared ethos that is sympathetic to the values and interests of such Christian communities, or a deliberate attempt to recruit staff in the areas likely to attract such a proven postgraduate market, or whether we need to consider other factors, is a question that demands further study. We look forward to future research that might afford a more in depth exploration of this pattern.

Experiences of gender bias in TRS: the interview results

We turn now to the results of the interview survey of academic staff working in TRS, and consider first some of the issues specific to the disciplines within TRS, before considering questions of academic behaviour, personal confidence, and some generic concerns faced by women in the academy.

Differences within the disciplines covered by Theology and Religious Studies

The presence of Theology and Religious Studies within UK universities has a long and complex history, drawing in long-standing connections with churches, arrangements for the training of clergy, efforts to establish the academic study of religion independent of such links, and the shifting status of the constituent sub-disciplines of TRS, including economic factors reflecting changing institutional priorities and constraints. As staff and student numbers have fluctuated, and curricula have been adjusted to respond to

broader changes, so the politics of disciplinary identity have precipitated a shift in nomenclature. While some of the ancient Scottish universities retain the title of ‘Divinity’ for their often large TRS faculties, the traditional ‘Theology’ of many English universities has changed to ‘Theology and Religious Studies’ and, increasingly, ‘Theology and Religion’. Meanwhile, the determinedly non-theological ‘Religious Studies’ departments at Lancaster and Stirling have undergone nominal adjustments in light of downsizing and departmental mergers within the broader social sciences or humanities. Strictly speaking, most departments have now – to varying degrees – become fully ‘TRS’, in the sense of embracing the textual, philosophical and historical study of Judaeo-Christian tradition, and to some extent of other religious traditions, alongside a more social science-inclined, dispassionate analysis of religious phenomena that favours the contemporary, lived aspects of religion more broadly conceived. This is a messy, complexly overlapping set of pursuits and should not be equated with the more strictly differentiated US tradition, in whose universities ‘Theology (or ‘Divinity’) faculties often have little if anything to do with their colleagues in the Department of Religion down the hallway, or else confine themselves to definitively ‘Christian’ universities. While the separation of church and state in the US has generated a higher education sector that draws fairly clear boundaries around religious and secular institutions, in the UK universities, complex histories have given rise to a more ambiguous set of relationships. As such, disentangling the politics of TRS in a way that illuminates patterns of gender distribution is a complicated task.

When broken down into departmental type, it is the TRS departments that have historically and predominantly concerned themselves with

² Working with 2010-11 figures, in the department at Aberdeen 23.8% of its staff were female; at Durham the figure was 16.7%; at St Andrews it was 10.5%.

Only Nottingham exceeded the national figure of 29%, with 31.3% of its staff being female.

traditional Christian theology that tend to have the lowest proportions of female staff. Amongst the reasons for this that emerged in the interviews, perhaps the most evident was the nature of the religious communities on which Christian theology has historically drawn:

if it [the number of women in teaching positions] were on the low side, one reason might be the relative conservatism of faith communities. Insofar as the sector recruits scholars who come out of faith communities or from faith communities and are motivated by their faith to study Theology or Religion, then that might have something to do with it.

I think it [the gender balance] is made worse in theology because of the general attitude towards women in Christianity as a whole that then affects how seriously women's work is taken by academics in theology...[although it] isn't so bad in religious studies.

A number also noted their experience of the Church as more sexist than the academy. One, recounting her initial appointment to a theological college, reported:

the Anglican Church is unbelievably sexist, I mean it's much more sexist than academia ... people wrote letters to the Church Times complaining when I was appointed to the post.

It may also be the case that certain sub-disciplines come with gendered baggage. Systematic theology in particular was singled out as an area that attracts more men.

Systematic theology, which is my field, is still pretty male dominated and the Society for the Study of Theology which is the British scholarly society for the discipline is still too male dominated. There are not as many women graduate students working in systematic theology as there should be. I've found it relatively difficult to recruit significant numbers of women to work in ST [systematic theology], although I have

had two or three very able ones in recent years but on the whole, most of the applications I receive are from men rather than women. I'm not quite sure why that is. Is it because a certain kind of theology is seen as abstract, speculative, analytic, not practical?

Or as one respondent put it bluntly:

I mean if you want more women in a department then don't advertise systematic theology, you know, it's that obvious...

In the case of systematic theology, parallels with the discipline of Philosophy suggest themselves. Helen Beebee (forthcoming 2013) has explored in that context the way in which 'reason' – essential to both the method and, in some sub-disciplines, the object of TRS – is conceived in a gendered way (12). By contrast, Biblical studies was also seen as being gendered, but more because of its confessional connections than its style of reasoning:

Biblical studies is very male dominated and it's very confessionally motivated. And Christian confessional: Judaism is still massively underrepresented in biblical studies in the UK. And I think obviously the whole confessional context of... biblical scholarship plays a huge role, and obviously has had its own issues with gender.

However there was some evidence of efforts by academic societies to encourage change:

SOTS [the Society of Old Testament Studies] made a conscious decision that it wanted to be more welcoming and more encouraging and more supportive of younger scholars ... a lot of those younger scholars are women at the moment ... there are other women in the Society that are now modelling what it is.

An intriguing dimension of this is the relative status of the disciplines of Theology and Religious Studies, and the connection of this to the gender balance of those who study each of

them. One respondent reflected on the common perception that

RE is definitely a girly subject and it's a low status subject ... Theology [is] a male thing to do but RE is a girly thing to do ... Theology sounds posher than Religious Studies and Philosophy sounds posher than Religious Studies and more male students do Philosophy.

She also drew on parallels with gender and status in other occupations, not least priesthood in the Church of England, and wondered whether the status of the occupation falls when the gender balance tilts towards a greater proportion of women, or the falling status of an occupation itself leads to its being increasingly less attractive to men.

Finally, feminist thought as an approach to theology and the study of religion brings to the fore a number of issues. At the undergraduate level it was felt to attract a greater proportion of female students, along with ethics and religious studies options; however it was also noted that optional modules in feminist theology tended only to attract those students who were already to some extent committed to the issues it raises, leading to pleas that feminist approaches be included in core programme modules. Among women setting out on academic careers, some chose not to be identified with feminist approaches, since they didn't wish to be pigeonholed ('You're a female academic so you must be doing feminist theology'), though one interviewee was happy to teach feminist theology and feminist theological ethics in order to secure a permanent post. In terms of research, the academic status of feminist theology was also regarded as moot in some quarters. One respondent found that in university REF planning, feminist theology was regarded as 'peripheral' and not significant or important: she was encouraged not to publish in journals with 'feminist' in the title, which were seen as less substantial in REF terms, but then found that

mainstream journals were not interested in feminist approaches, leading to an impasse. A further issue concerns the levels of interest now obtained by feminist approaches to theology and the changing valency of talk of feminism compared with the past:

I have a sense that a younger generation of women students, maybe scholars, is actually less interested in feminist theology than their predecessors were a generation ago. I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing but it's what they say.

The small band that would now be happy to call themselves feminists are kept at arm's length to some extent. It is a bit of a dirty word these days and replaced by gender studies and such like. Amongst the more enlightened I think there's probably more sympathy. But no, the label feminist, now, is going to position you. I think women would feel that that is going to position them as angry and a troublemaker...

Contrasts in academic behaviour

Closely connected to this is the issue of whether academic disciplines foster particular ways of behaving that are in some sense exclusionary. Helen Beebee (forthcoming 2013) explores this in asking whether "the culture of philosophical discussion is one that tends to alienate women" (4). In so far as TRS includes a number of sub-disciplines that overlap considerably with Philosophy – both in method, resources, the parameters of certain debates and the training of TRS academics, some of whom have degrees in Philosophy or related disciplines – it is fair to assume that if such problems exist in Philosophy departments, they will also to some degree exist within TRS. Beebee's concern within the context of Philosophy is not with adversarial debate per se, which she sees as a necessary part of maintaining robust and accountable scholarly discourse. Rather, she draws a distinction between an aggressive, confrontational style of interaction – apparently commonplace within

Philosophy seminars, especially at postgraduate level – and the content of the philosophical discussion taking place. The validity and strength of the latter is not dependent upon the deployment of the former, although students privy to such seminar discussions might assume this is the case. Instead, she argues for a more supportive and collaborative style of discussion, which puts shared resources at the service of a common pursuit of truth.

In backing up her criticisms of the more combative style of seminar discussion, Beebee alludes to the alienation some postgraduates feel as they navigate an environment driven by the aggressive public exposure of ‘weak’ arguments. In the evidence at our disposal, based on women staff recollecting their time as research students, a similar experience appears to occur among female TRS postgraduates, some of whom feel a sense of belittlement within male dominated seminar contexts, and male postgraduates sometimes appear just as culpable as academic staff in perpetuating the offending style of discussion.

I think at conferences there's a general feeling of being a bit on the sidelines, a bit excluded because there are these groups of very confident, assertive male post-graduate students with these groups of very assertive male professors and again if you make any comment, if you ask any question after a paper or make any comment that you've missed out this kind of feminist take on this argument or feminist theology has these problems with this argument...you're seen as ...being a feminist rather than it just be taken seriously as a valid comment.

In this example, both the individual is excluded and also the contribution of feminist theology, which is de-validated as a second rate form of theology. Indeed there is evidence of women opting out of some academic conferences because of the hostile atmosphere they have found there. Feminist theology conferences can

then take on the status of a refuge from an otherwise patriarchal and alienating environment:

The first conference I went to that was billed as Feminist Theology ...there was all these women there that I'd never seen at what would be considered the mainstream theology conferences and when I was saying to them, 'Why don't you go to these other ones?' they said, 'Well because the atmosphere's horrible. It's really male, arrogant, assertive, argumentative, I don't want to be part of that.' I quite often go to those conferences and think, 'What am I doing here? This is a bit horrible,' but I also think it's not going to change if women just stay away - then the men get to have their enclave and things won't change.

Despite this intimidating atmosphere, which was associated by some interviewees particularly with systematic theology, our evidence did not suggest that TRS is guilty of quite the level of aggressive discussion apparently common among philosophers. To be sure, much depends on individual staff members and on the cultures fostered within particular sub-disciplines, and it may be significant that women are more numerous within sub-disciplines – such as religious studies – that are characterised by a more warmly collaborative and supportive style of discussion than some sub-fields in traditional theology:

definitely if it's more religious studies based than theology I think it's a much more open, welcoming atmosphere and then the balance of male to female is much more even as well.

Of course, whether women are attracted to these areas because of this style of discussion, or the supportive styles of discussion are present because those women actively encourage them, is difficult to say. However it remains the case that an aggressive, uncompromising style of critical comment is found within a variety of contexts of academic life, and this can be a cause of disillusionment. For example, one of our

interviewees pointed to the experience of receiving peer review comments on a journal submission:

I think one of my worst days was the first thing I put in for a journal and the criticisms were so bad and I just felt so awful about it. It wasn't just the criticism, I could cope with that. It was just the way it was phrased and it was just so acerbic in tone. I think the way I describe academia is like it's a bit of a roller coaster so one day you could be on a complete high because somebody's raved about something you've written, the next day it can be a complete low because of something you've got back has just been trashed to pieces, you know, just pulled to pieces.

This individual had since come to understand this tendency as part of academic culture, something with which all academics have to contend.

Developing the confidence to succeed

To embark on and succeed in a profession which has traditionally been dominated by men, and in which professionally legitimated behaviours are frequently confrontational or oppositional, requires considerable confidence for women and for those who flourish better in more cooperative contexts. A large number of respondents felt that there were gender-related dimensions of academic confidence, at every level from giving conference papers to applying for jobs to seeking promotion.

I think as a woman you are more insecure ... if you take it back to the first word go I didn't think I was up for doing a PhD and I had somebody else that had to tell me, 'Actually you are good enough to do a PhD'.

I honestly think that everybody has those challenges and I think that some people are just better at hiding them and some of the male scholars who come across as, 'Well I'm saying this and obviously I'm

right,' when they're presenting a paper, actually if you get to know them turn out to be just as vulnerable as anybody else but there's a lot more bravado and hiding it and pretending that they are - , I mean some of them are super confident but there's also plenty that aren't but pretend that they are at conferences...

You know if there's one thing on the job description that they [women] can't do then they'll write themselves out of it whereas men will probably try and write round and say, 'Yes, yes, yes, I can do that'.

My personal sense is that men are probably more confident about putting themselves forward, particularly if they're at that stage when it's sort of touch and go whether they're actually quite ready for promotion. I think, on the whole, and this is a generalisation, a huge generalisation, but I think, on the whole, men are probably more likely to say, "I'll give it a go." And sometimes be lucky. And women probably more likely to say, "I don't think I'm quite ready or I haven't had the encouragement. I think I'd better wait."

Indeed two respondents specifically referred to 'imposter syndrome':

Most women I know in the field are deeply insecure about their abilities intellectually and academically. Whereas I think men tend to be more secure. I think we all suffer to a degree, most of us anyway, from imposter syndrome, you're going to be discovered any minute and thrown out. I think women particularly feel under-confident.

I was delighted to come across something called 'imposter syndrome' ... That sense of clearly I'm a fraud and this is ridiculous that people are waiting to hear what I've got to say about this. I know nothing about any of it and sooner or later, somebody's going to realise I'm a fraud and send me on my way!... it seems like there are lots of women who've experienced it, particularly in academia.

Amongst the changes in academic culture and university structures which were picked out as addressing this lack of confidence were: effective systems of academic mentoring in order to help junior staff learn to negotiate the system; active informal support from more senior members of staff, especially women academics; and the presence of visible role models who could inspire younger generations of female scholars – one respondent, now in a senior position, recounted how while still at sixth form college she had been motivated by a particularly striking woman academic to embark on theology and religious studies at undergraduate level and beyond.

Generic issues experienced by women in the academy

Many of the concerns listed above are peculiar to the unique history and subject configuration of Theology and Religious Studies. However, there were many problems experienced by women academics which are arguably generic: that is, there is no *prima facie* reason to believe that they are significantly different in Theology and Religious Studies when compared with many other disciplines taught in universities. Nevertheless, they bear rehearsing precisely because they are more widely spread.

The decision to have children and an academic career: The choice to pursue an academic career, initially by embarking on a PhD, is fraught with high levels of uncertainty, particularly when compared with similar professional vocations. No permanent post may end up in sight despite many years of specialist training as academic researcher and teacher, including a variety of short-term or part-time doctoral and post-doctoral positions. This creates financial hazard, intensified in recent years by the weight of overhanging student loans, and also reinforces pressures on workload due to the need to publish and make oneself attractive to potential

employers. For women this typically happens at exactly the time in life when they are considering whether and when to have children. While proof may be hard to come by, it is hard not to give some credence to the speculation of several respondents that this is a significant reason why many women pull out of the academic job market and indeed decide not to start out on doctoral work at all.

Long hours culture and work-life balance: While calls on the time of academic staff, particularly as a result of demands to produce research, may to some extent be endemic to the profession, the burden of this weighs differently on those who have the responsibility of child care or the care of elderly relatives. The timetabling of teaching, departmental meetings, research-related lectures or seminars, and the like, may all impact significantly on those who have to make childcare arrangements. These can be particularly difficult if they form part of an unofficial culture of expectations about attendance which does not reach a sufficiently tangible tipping point to invite the attention of university HR departments.

Traditional roles and promotion: Criteria for promotion, particularly in the research-led universities, tend to emphasize research to the near exclusion of all other forms of contribution to university life. Not only is this liable to disadvantage women who take career breaks for maternity or childcare reasons, with consequences for gender pay differentials, it is also liable to disadvantage them in that they are disproportionately likely to assume other kinds of role within the university, such as particular administrative or pastoral responsibilities. As some interviewees suggested, they may also be more likely to fill in for colleagues or be helpful around the department (including, at a trivial but symbolically significant level, 'being expected to make the tea'). As a result they may find themselves building up large credit balances in

informal favour banks that somehow never seem to get repaid, and certainly rarely through the financial remuneration or academic promotion processes.

The emphasis on the monograph: The gold standard of research output in many disciplines, especially in the arts and humanities, is the monograph. This can be decisive both for inclusion of staff members in the REF and as evidence for promotion. Yet it may also favour those who can muster lengthy periods of uninterrupted research time, including - crucially - research time garnered from outside the limits of the normal working week. Those who in addition may have taken time out for maternity leave or early years child care may well find themselves forced into a different pattern of publications and so find their career progression affected as a result, with consequences for the gender balance of senior appointments.

Bullying: There came from the respondents plenty of evidence, some of it quite shocking, of bullying of individual women. In some cases this was bullying from Heads of Department or senior members of the university, but more than one case was of being bullied as Head of Department by other senior male colleagues within the department, or even of being bullied by junior male colleagues. In some cases this had been resolved, or at least addressed, through recourse to formal procedures, in other cases it had required considerable personal resilience and ingenuity to find acceptable outcomes through informal means, while in others the situation had just been left to fester.

Evidence of change?

Despite this clear evidence of continuing problems, some evidence of change also emerged. Perhaps the most obvious area in which this appeared was in changing patterns of recruitment. In general the experience of those interviewed was that the gender balance was

slowly tilting towards a greater number of women in academic posts in Theology and Religious Studies. As the generations change, so attitudes are also changing. While many respondents had heard of appalling stories in relation to recruitment and promotion, in general it was the more senior and retired amongst them who could – and did – tell those stories from their own experience. By contrast the more junior interviewees, or those now moving into senior or management positions, were able to bear witness to a different set of expectations.

Well, I have heard many tales of battles from the previous generation, women who are now retired. That generation of women, I have many stories about how atrocious it was, especially in units that had connections with the Church. They were especially bad.

I've been on several appointments panels and I have never even sniffed the sense that others on the panel actually want to know whether this person is planning a child ... I really think that people are so ... sensitive to the law, and thankfully we have strong legal frameworks, because without those, I think things could quickly backtrack.

If a woman wants a job in academia today and is appropriately qualified, then she stands as good a chance as anybody else.

Indeed there was a perception from one of the male respondents that his career might have been adversely affected by the desire on the part of universities to redress the gender imbalance.

My perception then was that ... universities were making a very significant attempt to get women professors. So much so that I was finding it quite difficult to get a chair. I mean always with appointments you're torn between two desires. One is to have equality of treatment and the other is to actually prefer women to address an imbalance. I accepted both those principles, and I very strongly accepted the principle of preferring women because of

the imbalance, but in terms of my own career at that stage it was the only time when I felt that I was having to run uphill a bit harder.

The same person observed that appointments panels on which he had served had sought hard to include women at the shortlisting stage, but he also took the view that this had not been at the expense of appointments based on merit.

...in terms of making sure that female candidates are included in shortlists, that's been a very strong priority. Almost at the danger of damaging notions of equity. So if you simply looked at the lists in terms of publications or something like that, some of those lists would not have included a woman. But very conscious that women ought to have the opportunity, we've included women in that ... So in my experience it does affect whether somebody is put on a shortlist but it hasn't had an effect I don't think that I've been able to see on the actual appointments.

The need for change before the interview process, as well as a sense of fairness within it, was one with which a senior female respondent concurred:

I think that at the level of interview panels ... and those sorts of things, I've never seen discrimination take place. But, it's before that, it's the women aren't applying to do it or it's that they're not maybe treated similarly in the short-listing process. I mean, once they come on interview they're treated exactly the same.

Conclusions

The evidence we have presented suggests that there have been significant changes in gender balance in TRS in the UK in the past few decades, not least in patterns of recruitment. Nevertheless the task of achieving gender equality can at best be described as incomplete, and in many areas of attitude and behaviour the

changes remain superficial. Many of the issues are widespread in the sector and are not unique to this subject area, but some are unique to TRS and are accentuated within particular sub-disciplines. At the top end of the subject area, the fact remains that the proportion of women professors is strikingly low. Whether this will change over time as increasing numbers of female junior staff progress through remains to be seen. It certainly suggests that the issues will stay with us for a long time to come.

Recommendations

We close with a series of recommendations which emerge from our analysis of the data. Many of these are based on already existing best practice around the sector, but would benefit from being more widely recognized.

1. Academic staff should be aware that, while they may be able to depend on the enlightened attitudes of their colleagues, sexism may be evident within student behaviour, however subtle this might appear. Staff ought to be mindful of this within classroom contexts, and be willing to intervene and highlight behaviour or comments that are inappropriate. (For example, leaving offensive remarks without comment could be construed by students as condoning them).
2. Junior staff can benefit significantly from a strong mentoring system, especially when paired with a senior member of staff who can offer guidance on how to navigate the system of a particular university. This can help tackle a common experience of confusion and of being disadvantaged by a lack of familiarity with institutional conventions and procedures that are not always formally explained. While such mentoring will no doubt be of benefit for both men and women, choice of mentor is

important; for example, heads of department should consider whether another female staff member is most suitable, depending on availability and styles of working. Some may benefit from having a mentor in a different academic department, especially later in their career, as they may then voice concerns associated with departmental politics with someone not caught up in the same sets of issues.

3. In attempting to recruit more women to the academic staff, heads of department (and others involved in the recruitment process) should consider how the wording of the job description (including the job title) could be off-putting to some female applicants. For example, if some areas of TRS are widely considered to be both male-dominated and driven by a heavily gendered approach, then in recruiting to such an area, consideration could be given to broadening the language used to describe the sub-discipline covered, perhaps building in a desire that the successful applicant push the boundaries of the area into new debates.
4. In planning recruitment to academic posts, departments should consider the possible connection between patterns of postgraduate recruitment and the gender profile of the student body. In particular, if certain sub-disciplines are being privileged on account of their success in postgraduate recruitment, it is worth reflecting on how this may also influence the capacity of the department in question to attract female students. There are risks as well as opportunities associated with projecting a confessional image that comes with 'gender baggage', and such an image may – even if unwittingly – serve to perpetuate an institutional bias against women in the discipline.
5. In raising awareness of the significance of women in theology, in the history of religious traditions, in the gendered nature of discussion about TRS, etc, departments might consider building into their first year core modules coverage of these issues. Optional modules on feminist theology are valuable and worthwhile, but those who opt for them tend to be students already sympathetic to the perspectives covered. In challenging entrenched views on gender – whether rooted in religious or cultural perspectives – there is much to be said for confronting those committed to such views with a programme of study that integrates critical reflection on these ideas.
6. Universities should consider whether their policy on working hours and contractual requirements might unfairly disadvantage some women, especially those with childcare responsibilities. Might a greater acceptance of flexible working hours, job-share arrangements, part-time academic contracts, etc., allow more women to make the valuable contribution to the discipline of which they are capable without compromising domestic responsibilities or threatening their health and wellbeing?
7. Some university HR departments make it a policy to hold appointment panels to account if they produce a short-list of job candidates that is male-only. Questions are raised as to why this is the case, and a set of reasonable justifications has to be submitted. In encouraging greater attention to gender imbalance in academic job recruitment, this would be a positive innovation in all universities.
8. University managers ought to consider whether they do all they can to enable female academics to balance their professional with their domestic responsibilities. A simple measure would be to allow timetabling procedures to take into account personal commitments (such as the school run or caring for elderly parents) at particular points in the day when organising teaching and staff meetings.

9. Heads of department should be mindful of the dangers of stereotyping women by placing them within administrative roles that have a pastoral dimension. The evidence suggests such jobs are not treated as carrying equal weight to other, more directive or committee chair-based roles, and so their occupancy can influence patterns of promotion and career advancement.
10. Evidence suggests university-wide networks of female academic staff can be a valuable source of support and career guidance. In institutions where this is in place, every effort should be made to promote it so that new members of staff are aware of its existence; in those where it does not exist, staff should be encouraged and resourced in order to bring such a network into being.
11. Universities should be aware that bullying of women – as with other groups – is often unnoticed, unregistered and unreported. Even where there are excellent bullying or harassment policies in place, institutional cultures can emerge that perpetuate a set of behavioural norms that can easily be exposed as unacceptable once highlighted and subjected to critical observation. University-wide networks of women and a strong, confidential mentoring system can make voicing concerns about bullying much easier for female staff, and support groups for female students can serve the same function. Sometimes, these gatherings can be usefully combined, as with the Café des Femmes group established for female staff and students in Theology and Religion at Durham University, which continues to meet regularly, providing a safe environment in which women can share ideas, experience academic development and offer one another support. Such group-based mechanisms must be viewed by universities as serious and important contexts for support and as channels through which positive reforms might be developed and concerns heard.

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